CHRISTIANS AND JEWS
SEPTEMBER 19, 2004

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Psalm 33:1–12
Romans 9:1–5, 11:1–2, 17–18, 25–36

The bread and wine of Communion remind us of the pivotal point of Christianity:
God poured out his life into the life of a human being,
and thereby—since we are all connected to one another,
whether we like it or not—into the lives of all human begins.
The Logos of God, as the Gospel of John so bluntly puts it, "becomes Flesh."
But what is so frequently overlooked by all churches
is that the flesh into which the heart of God was poured was not just any flesh;
it was—as the great theologian Karl Barth reminds us—Jewish flesh.
This means that if we Christians are in some way linked to Jesus Christ,
we are thereby united to one who lived and died a Jew.

Harvey Cox
Common Prayers:
Faith, Family, and a Christian's Journey through the Jewish Year

We come here this morning, O God,
to be intentionally and alertly and receptively in your presence.
We come to ponder the mystery of our lives and the goodness of your creation.
So startle us again with your truth, and in this time together,
speak the word you have for us today, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This sanctuary was full last Wednesday evening and again Thursday morning at 11:00 a.m. and not with Presbyterians. Our neighbors, the members of Congregation Sinai, located two blocks west of here on Delaware, were observing Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, in our sanctuary as they have been doing for nine years. We are delighted to share our church with them, and they are so comfortable here now that their members have staked out their favorite Presbyterian pews—just as many of you do.

Ten days later, on the eve and day of Yom Kippur, our neighbors from Sinai Congregation will return for two more High Holy Day observances.

Rosh Hashanah, literally the head of the year, commemorates the creation of the world. It is the beginning of a new year, when all living things are judged. It is both serious and festive, a time of spiritual renewal and prayer and reflection. It is a time for families and friends to gather. The Shofar, a ram's horn, is trumpeted—a sound that is both plaintive and stirring, awaking every soul. Harvard theologian Harvey Cox married a Jewish woman, and each of them participates in the religious rituals and observances of the other. Cox says the Shofar emits a primal sound like nothing else one hears anywhere in the world. Cox has written a book about his experience, a book entitled *Common Prayers,* in which he observes that "the first thing a Christian notices about Judaism is that it is not about creed; it is about calendar. What binds Jews is not a confessional statement like the Apostle's Creed. It is the sounding of the Shofar, the lighting of the menorah. It is the annual return of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover."

Two candles are lighted on the eve of Rosh Hashanah; blessings are recited. Special foods include challah—traditional Jewish bread—apples and honey, and tables are set with the finest linen and silverware. And everybody goes to temple.

The ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the Days of Awe, a time of reflection and repentance that culminates in a twenty-four-hour fast beginning on the eve of Yom Kippur and lasting until sundown of the day itself. Yom Kippur is sometimes called the Day of Atonement, when in ancient times the high priest selected a goat and symbolically placed on the animal all the sins and guilt of the people and then drove it out into the wilderness—the scapegoat. That ritual is no longer practiced. Instead the emphasis is on repentance, prayer, giving charity, and new beginnings. So next Friday evening and again on Saturday, our Congregation Sinai friends will return to our sanctuary for High Holy Day services, and again, as on our Christmas and Easter, every seat will be taken.

Our relationship with the Jewish community at large and with Congregation Sinai in particular is important to us. Presbyterian and Jewish relationships generally have been good, marked by mutual respect and trust. A Jewish leader said recently that traditionally Presbyterians have been our best friends. Recently, however, there have been problems, road bumps—although to some of our Jewish friends they seem more like major collisions. Because the relationships are so important but also because there are deep theological and biblical issues at stake, I thought we might spend our time this morning—the Sunday between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—thinking about them together.

The recent General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) took four actions that have received a lot of attention both in the Jewish and secular press. Two in particular were perceived by many Jewish friends as hurtful, damaging to the relationship we have enjoyed, and to some, a betrayal of trust.

Worshipers were surprised on Sunday, July 25 when Jewish neighbors appeared outside distributing leaflets opposing the Presbyterian actions. Just last Monday, Steven Nasiter, President of the Chicago Jewish Federation, told 800 people at a luncheon that the Presbyterian church had "declared economic warfare on Israel." David Prager, a popular West Coast talk show host called on Christians to distance themselves from "this sick church." And our good friend Emily Soloff, Executive Director of the American Jewish Committee, said the Presbyterian actions felt like a slap in the face.

One of those actions was a public criticism of the State of Israel's policies regarding the Palestinian people, the ongoing occupation of Palestinian territory, the self-perpetuating violence, and specifically the construction of the security barrier in Palestinian territory. Almost every word in that paragraph can be and is disputed: barrier, wall, fence, territory, occupation. The despicable ongoing violence inflicted by radical Palestinian groups such as Hamas on innocent Israeli citizens, along with the overt hostility to Israel—even its existence—on the part of some of its neighbors create a sense of siege. And the chosen response to that violence—Israeli attacks in the West Bank and Gaza, targeted assassinations, bulldozing homes and vineyards with mounting civilian casualties—produces more rage and inevitably more suicide bombings. So the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—and we are certainly not alone—precisely because Israel is a democracy, where human rights are valued, presumes to add its voice to others hoping, praying, for a different approach and for a peaceful and just resolution of the conflict.

Some Jews see any non-Jewish criticism of Israel or the specific policies of the Sharon government as anti-Israel, anti-Jewish, or anti-Semitic. It is simply not that. It is simply what is: revulsion at violence spawning more violence, innocent civilians killed, Israeli's living in fear and Palestinians in desperation.

The General Assembly also received an overture from the Presbytery of St. Augustine directing the church to divest itself of any investments in companies doing business in Israel. The strongest Jewish reaction in this country was about this issue. I hope we can be clear about what happened and didn't happen. There is plenty to disagree about without arguing over something that didn't happen. What the General Assembly passed was a revised version to do a study and prepare a plan for staged, selected divestment from businesses whose products are harmful to Palestinians and Israelis. So no divestments have been carried out. A report will come to the General Assembly Council later. It is not a blow to Israel's economy. In fact, Israel's economy will not feel it. It is an attempt to use the only power the church has, the power of moral persuasion, to press for positive change. There was no mention of South Africa, no insinuation that there is a similarity to apartheid. In fact, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has, since 1948, repeatedly supported the existence of a safe and secure Israel and a safe and secure Palestinian state. I cannot say that strongly enough. This is not taking the Palestinian side. It is not an attack on Israel. It is a modest attempt by one

small denomination to say a word of peace and justice and hope in the middle of continuing mind-numbing violence and human suffering.

And the General Assembly made a decision that has deeper theological implications. A year ago the Presbytery of Philadelphia established a new church development called Yavadot Yisrael. It's a church that says it intends to appeal to nonpracticing secular Jews who do not want to give up the practices of Judaism and to people in mixed marriages. And so it uses Jewish symbols—the Star of David, menorah, the minister wears a yarmulke. Jews feel, understandably, that Presbyterians are usurping and inappropriately using precious Jewish symbols to target Jews for evangelization and conversion. Jews and Presbyterians objected. Presbyterians around the country—including this Presbyterian—objected because there was national PCUSA money involved. The Assembly heard all the arguments and, unfortunately decided not to do anything at this time until another study of Jewish-Christian relations could be carried out. I was disappointed. I wish the Assembly had cancelled the support, and I wish the Presbytery of Philadelphia had changed the character of that new church, removed the Jewish symbols, apologized to the Jewish neighbors, told the minister to take off the yarmulke and quit trying to look like a rabbi, but it didn't, although I believe ultimately that is what will happen.

The underlying theological and biblical issues are as old as the church itself and have everything in the world to do with relationships between modern Christians and Jews.

What is this place, in God's plan, for God's original chosen people?

Jesus was a Jew. So was the apostle Paul—a devout, scholarly Jew, a Pharisee. The early Christian church began within Judaism, and it lived within Judaism for several decades. Followers of Jesus remained observant Jews, sometimes comfortably, sometimes contentiously. Conflicts over theology and practice complicated the relationship, and what finally caused the separation was the increasing presence of Gentiles in the church. The first Christians simply assumed a person had to be Jewish to be a true follower of Jesus. After a huge argument and a meeting in Jerusalem at which early church leaders acknowledged that Gentiles could become Christians, the break became inevitable.

What finally sealed it was the catastrophe of 70 A.D. when the Roman Emperor Titus turned the Roman Legions loose and destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and, in the first-century version of the "Final Solution," drove all the remaining Jews out of the city and country. Dispersed them–the Diaspora, the dispersion of the Jews from their land— from 70 A.D.until 1948. The church at that point went its own way.

Through the centuries, Jewish people settled and lived wherever they could in the cities of Asia Minor, Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Northern Europe, Spain. And in one of the great ironies of history, they were more welcome and safer in Muslim countries after the founding of Islam than in any Christian kingdom.

In fact, Christianity very early began to develop a nasty and tragic tendency toward anti-Semitism. Because they had no land of their own, the Jewish ethnicity, religious customs, and traditions were all the Jewish people had to hang on to for a sense of identity. They were outsiders everywhere, exiles, strangers. The church started to call them Christ killers. They were ghettoized, randomly persecuted, stereotyped, humiliated. In 1492, after Ferdinand and Isabella had defeated the Moors, they turned on the large Spanish Jewish population and gave them a choice: conversion or deportation. Martin Luther turned on them. Luther said terrible things about Jews. Still they lived and held closely together and treasured Jewish customs and culture in spite of continuing persecution. And then the twentieth century, and anti-Semitism was embraced by a fascist dictator as a pillar of his 1,000-year Reich, and before it was over, their neighbors—German, Polish, French, Italian—turned on them or turned away until 6 million were dead.

So, yes, there is reason to be watchful and cautious and concerned when Christians seem intent on either perpetuating the racism of the past or attacking at another level, a theological one.

Paul asks the question, Has God cancelled the covenant God made with Abraham? Paul can't bring himself to say that. "Has God rejected his people? By no means!" (Romans 11:1). "They are beloved. . . . The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (11:29).

Some Christians have always concluded that God's covenant with Israel has been cancelled, replaced, superseded by a new covenant with the Christian church in Jesus Christ and that Jews need to become Christians in order to receive God's gift of salvation. I do not agree with that. I do not believe Paul would agree with it.

I believe Paul would call Jews to be faithful Jews and Christians to be faithful followers of Jesus and for both to trust a good and merciful God who is the creator of all, a God who chooses people, elects people, commissions people—not for special privilege, certainly not for religious superiority, but for service, to be a light to the world. Paul is clear: "The gifts of God and the call of God are irrevocable." The covenant remains. We—I—believe that Christians share that covenant, share the gift of God's mercy and grace that we experience in Jesus Christ, and share the responsibility. We do not replace it. We are family. We are from the same root. We, Paul says, are a later graft, but now we are part of God's redeeming activity in the world.

Christians have in the past spent altogether too much time worrying about how God will finally deal with Jewish people. Denominations used to have special missionary departments that targeted Jews for evangelism and conversion, which from the Jewish perspective is an attack on their faith, identity, and existence. I oppose that. What should our stance be? I believe we are called as followers of Jesus to be an open, welcoming community. If Jews find a home here, wonderful. Everyone is welcome. But I do not believe Jews need to become Christians in order to receive the grace and mercy and love—the unconditional and eternal love of God.

Yale Professor David Bartlett says that Jews and Christians each have a share in God's plan to redeem and restore creation. And theologian Douglas John Hall observes about the amazing presence of Jews in history in spite of persistent persecution, pogroms, holocausts, and evangelism crusades, "This small people sees itself being chosen for a large responsibility. But it does not fancy itself becoming large, important, powerful. The great contemporary writer Elie Wiesel was accurately reflecting the ancient concept of Jewish choseness when, in an interview he said. 'As a Jew, I do not wish to make the world more Jewish, only more human'" (*The Cross in our Context*, p. 190).

The world could use more of that. A few days after September 11, 2001, graffiti appeared on a wall standing near ground zero: "Dear God, Save us from people who believe in you." Another sign read: "Religion Kills."

And so, far more important than issues that divide us is a precious vision that Jews and Christians share and that lies at the very heart of both of our traditions —of a world at peace, a world in which human life is honored and respected and protected, a world in which justice is understood to be God's love in action, a world in which the weakest and smallest and most vulnerable are cared for.

We share that vision, and it is very precious and very critical.

And we should welcome every opportunity to reach out and join hands with Jewish neighbors, simply to stand together as custodians of this precious vision.

My colleague, Michael Sternfield, the rabbi at Congregation Sinai, and I have been in conversation, and he and I have decided that the current situation is the perfect time to reaffirm our friendship and the common vision shared by our two congregations. So we agreed to announce—he at High Holy Day services and I this morning—a new initiative, a "Journey of Faith" undertaken by our two congregations. We and they will ask a group of our members to meet together, to study sacred scripture, to look at some theology, and to gently approach the difficult topic of Israel/Palestine. And in time, perhaps a year or so, to travel together and visit both Israel and Palestine.

Christianity is our religion, our spiritual and cultural home. We share with Judaism and our Jewish neighbors a grounding in Scripture that we call Old or First Testament or Hebrew Scripture. We share a vision of God's purpose for creation, the just and peaceful world we call the kingdom of God. We share the ideal of respect extended to others—of other faith.

And we share, at the very heart of the matter, a belief and trust in one God, the God we know in Jesus Christ, the same God our Jewish neighbors know in scripture, history, Torah, and sacred ritual, a God of mercy and love who calls us to live faithfully and in the joyful freedom of a love that will never let us—any of us—go.

Amen.